

FILE ONLY

CIA DISPUTES CONTRA THROAT-SLITTING CHARGES

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WASHINGTON

A newly declassified CIA report disputes charges of Nicaraguan rebel atrocities, contending the Contras could not have slit the throats of captives because they "are normally not equipped with either bayonets or combat knives."

That claim, which was contained in a 12-page report obtained last week by The Associated Press, was challenged by two former rebel leaders. In interviews, they said combat knives and bayonets were common among the troops and were used to execute prisoners.

"Almost everybody carried a knife," said Edgar Chamorro, who was a director of the CIA-organized Nicaraguan Democratic Force, FDN, until he was fired a year ago for publicly criticizing the movement. "FDN people used (the knives) to cut the throats of the enemy and prisoners."

Salvador Icaza, a former FDN officer now living in the United States, said "having a knife in the jungle is a matter of survival" and a majority of FDN troops carried one. Icaza also said slitting throats was a favorite method of killing prisoners.

According to the CIA document, the agency's investigation was based on seven hours of interviews with FDN field officers. Although the document is not dated, administration officials said it was prepared last spring in response to a detailed report on 28 alleged incidents of Contra abuses.

One State Department official, who insisted on anonymity, said the CIA report is considered "the best thing" done by the U.S. government on alleged Contra atrocities and cited it as support for the administration's view that the atrocity charges are planted by Nicaragua's leftist government.

But Rep. Sam Gejdenson, D-Conn., a House Foreign Affairs Committee member who has pressed for an investigation of the human rights charges, called the report "incredibly sloppy at best and intentionally deceptive at worst."

Noting that the investigation was based on interviews with Contra troops, Gejdenson added, "That is like bringing an accused murderer to trial and deliberately ignoring the evidence, forgetting to cross-examine the defendant and then losing the witness list."

While acknowledging some Contra abuses, the CIA document challenges many charges contained in a report by New York lawyer Reed Brody, who compiled 145 affidavits from Nicaraguans and Americans who said they witnessed or were victims of Contra human rights abuses in 28 separate incidents.

"Throughout the (Brody) report, defended localities are portrayed as innocent villages and FDN attacks are depicted as attacks on innocent civilians," the CIA document said in arguing that many of the so-called "civilians" were actually combatants.

"The frequent claims of kidnapping that run throughout the report constitute the best example of misuse of words," it asserted. "There is nobody in the FDN who is there against his-her will - it is an entirely voluntary organization."

But Chamorro, former FDN commander Jose Efren Martinez Mondragon and other ex-rebels have said the FDN does practice forced recruitment and kill or abuse captives. Even a White House report last November said, "instances of forced recruitment and summary execution of military prisoners ... may well have occurred."

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It was felt that the junior officers would have supported him in his clash with the conservatives.

CIA agents had been closely monitoring the activities of the junior officers since they engineered a barracks' coup in March 1984 which ousted the virulent anti-communist armed forces commander, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez.

Honduras is the center for U.S. intelligence operations in Central America. It plays a vital role in providing information on Sandinist military movements and the operations of left-wing guerrillas fighting the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador.

U.S. intelligence sources said there was concern that a populist leader similar to the late Panamanian strong-man Omar Torrijos could emerge from the ranks of the junior officers.

Torrijos, who was killed in a plane crash in 1982, was a left-leaning soldier who opposed what he regarded as U.S. imperialist ambitions in Central America and successfully negotiated the handing over of the American-controlled Panama Canal to Panamanian sovereignty.

He also supported the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran guerrillas.

There were also fears that had the junior officers taken charge, they might have opened talks with the Sandinistas.

Many Hondurans oppose the presence of the Contras here and think their activities could lead to all out war with Nicaragua.

Lopez Reyes left Tegucigalpa for Houston, Texas, with his family on February 2. He said he would return to Honduras after several weeks vacation and he might resign from the military to work for peasant and labor groups.